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Kearny's Dragoons Out West: The Birth of the U.S. Cavalry

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Kearny's Dragoons Out West: The Birth of the U.S. Cavalry, by Will Gorenfeld and John Gorenfeld. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. xiii, 466 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer William Whittaker is the research director of the Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa. He is editor of *Frontier Forts of Iowa* (2009), *The Archaeological Guide to Iowa* (2015), and the *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*.

The 1st U.S. Dragoons are deeply intertwined with early Iowa history. The unit was formed in response to Black Hawk's 1832 uprising, when many Sauk bands left Iowa to return to traditional lands in Illinois, then went on a chaotic march across Illinois and Wisconsin before being slaughtered along the Mississippi trying to return to Iowa. The disorganized response by U.S. troops and local militias—it took three months to locate and defeat Black Hawk's band—spurred the creation of a highly mobile mounted federal force modeled on the dragoon regiments that had been disbanded before the War of 1812. These new dragoon forces would be stationed along the frontier to police large regions with speed and force. In Iowa, the 1st Dragoons maintained Fort Des Moines No. 1 in Montrose, Fort Des Moines No. 2 in Des Moines, Fort Atkinson, and several forts and posts along and near the Missouri River. Dragoon-occupied forts in nearby states, including the second Fort Crawford in Wisconsin and posts near the Council Bluffs in Nebraska, also helped pacify what is now Iowa. The dragoons were largely responsible for the removal of Sauk, Meskwaki, Potawatomi, and Ho-Chunk from Iowa and maintained order in Iowa until settlement.

The Gorenfelds' attempt at a new history of the 1st Dragoons is broadly satisfying, creating a vivid history with juicy quotations and a free-ranging style appropriate to the subject matter. It is structured so that it jumps around in time and space, often without warning, so frequent backtracking is required to figure out when and where the current narrative thread takes place. Despite the book's title, Stephen Watts Kearny is really not the focus of the book; he is an important player in the text but not the central one, which is fine, since the supporting cast members, especially the irascible Henry Dodge, are typically far more engaging and entertaining.

I appreciated the historical overview of the dragoons on their western campaigns, a topic that takes up the bulk of the book and one that I had only a cursory knowledge of, but errors and omissions in the historical review of the early dragoon efforts in Iowa, a topic I know well, make me question the overall thoroughness of the research.

There were two separate Fort Des Moines, one occupied 1834–1837 in Montrose and one occupied 1843–1846 in Des Moines. I thought I had misread the relevant sections, but going over it more carefully it seems that the authors occasionally confuse them. Their few statements about the physical construction and location of Fort Atkinson also raise an eyebrow; they claim that it was completed in 1842, that it had two stone barrack buildings, and that it “gazed upon the Turkey River.” All three claims—virtually all the physical information they provide about the fort—are factually incorrect. (Perhaps if you stood on the roof of the tallest barracks and jumped up and down you *might* be able to gaze on the Turkey River a half-mile away, provided all the intervening trees were cut.) The authors barely acknowledge the dragoons’ presence in the Council Bluffs area, where they oversaw the historically important eviction of tribes west of the Missouri River, even though there were two forts named for Kearny near the Council Bluffs. The cursory overview of dragoons in Iowa likely stems from the book’s focus on the Far West, exacerbated by an overreliance on outdated historical summaries; most of their Iowa-related bibliographic sources are 60 to 100 years old and lack the cross-cultural contextualization of more recent historical texts.

Their larger thesis, that the tact and diplomacy of Kearny and other dragoon commanders allowed them to police Indians with minimal bloodshed, is also suspect. This so-called “pax Jacksonia” between 1833 and 1846 does not stand up to much scrutiny. In Iowa, it was less the diplomacy of U.S. leaders than the demoralized state of the Indian tribes they were primarily dealing with that led to this peace. The Sauk were crushed in 1832, the Meskwaki and Ho-Chunk had a well-established pattern of avoiding conflict with the United States by isolating themselves in remote locations, the Potawatomi were acculturated and allied with the United States, and the Dakota—the most formidable tribe the dragoons encountered during this period—were at the periphery of the dragoons’ patrol range. Even so, during this “pax Jacksonia” armed clashes between dragoons and Dakota occurred in Iowa. Out west, the text suggests, the dragoons acted primarily out of well-founded caution, declining to attack well-armed mobile natives with their small and isolated forces.

Nitpicking aside, this is generally a fun book to read, and it straddles the boundary between academic and popular history. I learned that I am fairly myopic about my understanding of the dragoons and realize that I need to gaze beyond Iowa to better understand the motivations and actions of the U.S. military in Iowa.